

Ukraine: A Clown With a Balancing Act

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Elections to Ukraine's parliament produced the first one-party majority since the end of the USSR. But as nationalist violence persists, comedian-president Volodymyr Zelenskiy's base is anything but stable.

This April, popular comedian and successful show businessman Volodymyr Zelenskiy became Ukraine's president, winning a landslide victory over oligarch Petro Poroshenko. Seventy-three percent of voters rejected Poroshenko's aggressive nationalism in favor of a new face who promised to defy the "old politicians" and their corruption. This victory was but reinforced in the July 21 parliamentary elections. Zelenskiy's brand new party, Servant of the People — named after the comedian's TV show — won a solid majority, taking 254 of 450 seats.

Decisively, this also helped turn the page on the political divides established by the Maidan uprising of 2014. While five years ago the parties who identified with Maidan won a significant majority, this time they took just one in six seats; two of the five parties that formed the ruling coalition in 2014 fell below the 5 percent threshold to enter parliament. After collapsing to close to zero in the polls, the second-largest party in the last parliament — People's Front — did not even put up lists of candidates. Meanwhile, the "pro-Russian," anti-Maidan opposition parties increased their representation from twenty-nine to forty-nine seats, though this still counts for barely one in ten of the total.

For the first time in the history of post-Soviet Ukraine, there will be a single-party majority and government. This result came as a surprise even for the winners of the elections. Indeed, if the elections proved that Ukraine's old elites do not understand their country anymore, their replacements understand it hardly any better.

Rejecting Patronage Politics

This election had initially been tabled for October. Yet in his very first speech during his inauguration to the presidential office, Zelenskiy chose to disband parliament and call for the snap elections. Lacking a base to rely on in parliament, he hoped that holding early elections would keep together his coalition of voters — a highly diverse array of Ukrainians united only by their rejection of Poroshenko.

Not everything seemed to go Zelenskiy's way. He proposed a switch from a "mixed" system — where half of the seats are assigned proportionally, and the rest on a first-past-the-post basis in single-member constituencies — to full proportional representation. Since Servant of the People was, at that time, just a brand lacking any party structure and strong local candidates, both Zelenskiy and the large majority in the outgoing parliament assumed that the fully proportional representation would benefit Zelenskiy, since his party was polling over 50 percent of the vote. Parliament thus voted against changing the electoral system. Yet Sunday's elections disproved the expectations of both Zelenskiy and outgoing MPs. With 43 percent of the vote for the party list, Servant of the People candidates won almost two-thirds of the single-mandate districts.

These local constituencies have long been dominated by the politics of patronage and clientelism. Ukrainians even have a special term, *siiaty hrechku*, which essentially means buying voters for miserable handouts or small improvements in the district. Not surprisingly, in one of the poorest countries in Europe — a land where each election usually only brought fresh disappointments — there were indeed many people who valued their vote less than even a small package of cheap food. Local strongmen could thus ensure their own election (or that of their loyalists) across multiple consecutive terms, allowing them to protect their business interests and avoid criminal prosecution.

The vote for Servant of the People candidates over local barons was a sharp rejection of this system. Some of the new MPs are well-known celebrities, especially figures from Zelenskiy's TV work, popular journalists, or bloggers. Surprisingly, only a small minority are likely connected to Ihor Kolomoisky — an oppositional oligarch who supported Zelenskiy, yet is hardly his master. Yet, the overwhelming majority were unknown to the general public, even in their own districts. More often, they came from small or medium businesses and "ordinary" professions — wedding photographers, primary school teachers, and pizzeria owners won against local barons and the candidates from pro-Maidan nationalist or anti-Maidan opposition parties. The Servant of the People candidates often didn't even campaign locally — their only resource was the party brand and people's rejection of the traditional establishment.

One-Party Diversity

As a result, three-quarters of the members of the new parliament have never served as MPs before. Servant of the People purposefully barred any former MPs — even those who had been cheerleading for Zelenskiy — from its party list and its candidates in single-member districts. The Voice Party, led by pop singer Sviatoslav Vakarchuk, did the same; it formed its list from typical pro-Western, national-liberal NGO people. Vakarchuk had been intensively nurtured by the United States as the future leader of pro-Western forces, instead of the hated and corrupt Poroshenko. The pop star had even seriously considered a presidential run, yet in this parliamentary election barely topped 5 percent.

So inexperienced is its new set of MPs, Servant of the People is organizing a special summer school for the rookie lawmakers to teach them 101 courses in parliamentary procedure, public policy, and economics. The new MPs' average age is seven years less than that of their predecessors; the number of women has shot up from just 9 percent to 21 percent. The young MPs have already been attacked for their lack of political background, higher education, or experience in "regular" professions. This criticism by supporters of the old government has a strong flavor of class arrogance, as if decisions of the old, corrupt, and wealthy elites were necessarily more competent.

However, any naive cheerleading about a "plebeian" revolution would be quite mistaken. Servant of the People is not a people's movement with a base among grassroots activists. While it did make an open call to citizens to put themselves forward to stand under its brand, the selection process was anything but transparent. The only evident criterion uniting the Servant of the People MPs is newness to politics.

As a result, Zelenskiy's majority in parliament is very diverse. The leaders of Servant of the People define its ideology as "libertarian." Thus, Ukraine is now probably the first country in the world where a nominally libertarian party forms the government it wants to reduce. Yet it is doubtful that most of its MPs have much idea about libertarian ideology. Their ranks also include nationalists not much different from those who ruled Ukraine after 2014, as well as staunch critics of Maidan and what followed. Many businessmen and other figures in its ranks have no clear ideological alignment. Yet, there are also many young people from the neoliberal, pro-Western NGO expert milieu. A couple even have backgrounds in the radical left.

Many observers expect that this single-party majority will soon differentiate into diverse factions. Yet the different tendencies therein may be polarized around business interests and not just political allegiances. These inexperienced MPs will likely be loyal to the party whip, yet there is also a risk that powerful oligarchs will easily integrate the newbie lawmakers into their corrupt political networks.

Prospects

Zelenskiy and his party now have a hold on both the presidency and the legislature, and will not need to rely on troublesome allies, unless the US embassy really insists on including the Voice Party in the governing coalition. The Servant of the People leaders could even compensate for the internal diversity within the party with tactical coalitions with other smaller forces. It will only take the backing of one or two such parties for Zelenskiy to secure the super-majority with which he could change the constitution. Servant of the People leaders are today considering snap local elections, in order to complete the renewal of elites at all levels of the state while hopes in Zelenskiy remain high.

Such a turnover might be hoped to provide for the opportunity of a radical, progressive breakthrough. Yet this is unlikely. Neither Servant of the People nor, in fact, any of the major parties that entered the parliament have any alternative to neoliberal projects for Ukraine's development. Zelenskiy's rhetoric revolves around the perpetual topics of post-Soviet "reforms": business-friendly policies, deregulation, and combating corruption.

The key hope, here, is to make Ukraine more attractive to foreign investors, while keeping the competitive "advantage" of having the cheapest labor force in Europe. In this perspective, the post-Soviet bureaucracy also needs to be replaced with what Zelenskiy calls "government in a smartphone." Businessmen also remain irritated by the payments and restrictions required by what is left of the much depleted Soviet welfare state. Some labor and housing regulations have not been changed since the 1970-80s, but they have been systematically underfinanced in the three decades since the USSR's collapse. These, nonetheless, often provide at least some safety net (if an insufficient one) for the poorest part of Ukraine's population.

The widespread narrative around "corruption" only partially relates to the (in)efficient work of public institutions. Its major stakes instead lie in the conflict between transnational and local capital — that is, the notorious oligarchs whose primary competitive advantage lies in favoritism from the Ukrainian state. If on TV the fictional president Holoborodko (played by Zelenskiy) takes bold moves against the IMF and oligarchs, neither the real-life Zelenskiy nor his party look ready for a major break with them, for example, calling for a default on the sovereign debt, nationalization, real actions against capital flight to offshores, and progressive taxation. In fact, the diverse Servant of the People majority itself will likely turn into a field of negotiation between pro-Western NGO-cracy and oligarchic lobbyists.

A further risk to investment is the war in Donbass. Yet, despite Zelenskiy's promises, any breakthrough in integrating the region back into Ukraine looks improbable, unless the United States, the European Union, and Russia reach a deal about Ukraine's future. As before the presidential elections, Zelenskiy continued to avoid making clear statements on the divisive issues surrounding the conflict, seeking to hold together his large and diverse coalition of voters. Statements by a speaker appealing to one group of voters could be disavowed by a different person from Zelenskiy's team the next day, in order not to alienate another group of voters.

This went some way in stemming the polarization of Ukraine by radical pro-Western and pro-Russian minorities. Nationalist pro-Maidan forces came up top in the far West, and the pro-Russian "Opposition Platform" in the far East, but everywhere else voters preferred Servant of the People.

Yet the regional cleavage has not disappeared. Zelenskiy and his party have thus far avoided specifying any substantial solutions or proactive state policies in reconciling still sharply different perceptions of Ukraine's past, recent political events since Maidan, the paths of future development, or even what it means to be Ukrainian.

Indeed, while the list bringing together the three main far-right parties fell far short of the 5 percent needed to enter parliament, radical nationalists will impact Ukrainian politics by other means. They still have no serious challengers in terms of street mobilization or mobilizing violence. Moreover, this second consecutive electoral failure will only push radical nationalists further toward a violent paramilitary strategy, when hopes of power at the ballot box seem futile. The more moderate and traditionalist Svoboda ("Freedom") Party, with a stronger electoral machine, will cede ground to the more paramilitary-oriented family of organizations (National Corps Party, National Militia, etc.) formed by the notorious Azov Regiment.

The most right-wing party in the new parliament will instead be ex-president Poroshenko's European Solidarity Party — unless anti-corruption investigations expected from the new government destroy it. Its 8 percent score relied on the same aggressive nationalist and "anti-Russian revanchist" messages that Poroshenko promoted during his presidential campaign. It attracted many former Svoboda voters and may continue drifting further to the far right, particularly in order to differentiate itself from the more liberal Voice Party which, like European Solidarity, mainly appealed to Western Ukrainians.

If Zelenskiy does gesture toward reconciliation, fulfills Ukraine's Minsk Accords obligations (e.g. granting a special autonomy status for Donbass and an amnesty for militants), or revises the many jingoistic laws passed during Poroshenko's rule, he will meet radical street opposition from nationalists and patriotic vigilantes, supported by a large segment of Ukrainian "civil society." They will level a well-worn catalogue of charges from "treason" to "Russian revanchism" and "capitulation to the aggressor." Zelenskiy has already conceded to nationalist mobilizations on a couple of occasions, most significantly when he condemned a planned telebridge between Russian state television and pro-Russian politician Viktor Medvedchuk's own channel. Just days later, when another Medvedchuk channel announced plans to show Oliver Stone's new movie *Revealing Ukraine*, the TV station's building was targeted by militants with a grenade launcher, leading to the cancellation of the broadcast.

One may expect that now, after another landslide electoral victory, he may go forward without looking back at the radical minority's wishes. Yet, the risks of the violent anti-governmental escalation are high, and Zelenskiy will need to ensure the total loyalty of the state enforcement apparatus — and support from the Western "partners" — before taking the risk of suppressing the dissident nationalists.

Hopes?

Not everything is doom and gloom. In fact, according to the polls, Ukrainians today have more optimistic expectations than at any point in post-Soviet history. Zelenskiy's spectacular advance and promise to cleanse the state of corrupt officials — and even anyone who held high office in the last government — is highly popular, notwithstanding the criticisms coming from Western ambassadors.

Yet, it is not hard to see how Zelenskiy could disappoint. If he is unable to get the IMF to agree to a reduction in the sky-high utility prices — a bugbear for millions of Ukrainians — or advance a peace process in Donbass, his support will surely fragment. Given that the major parties do not serve as structures for popular political engagement, Ukrainians' allegiances are volatile and may very easily shift from one celebrity to another, from a TV show to the new media. Many Ukrainians will, we can

hope, understand that what is needed is not just good-looking “new faces” in the government, but a totally new project for Ukraine’s economic and national development — driven not by a virtual, “empty signifier” brand but by a popular political force.

The source of such a force, however, remains unclear. The opposition (outside of pro-Russian forces) is in utter disarray. One smart politician Yevhen Muraiev — a man with interesting ideas of the reindustrializing developmental state and cultural decentralization — led an Opposition Bloc in the election. Yet this force’s local candidates were themselves archetypical oligarchs and local clientelist bosses, and it, in any case, scored just 3 percent. The most popular political blogger in Ukraine, Anatolii Sharii — a staunch critic of Poroshenko, living abroad — inspired an impressive mobilization of young people in the urban centers of southeastern Ukraine, who are tired of the lies, censorship, and the disregard for basic rights and laws that characterized the post-Maidan regime. His party did not exist even two months ago and got over 2 percent of votes, thanks exclusively to his YouTube channel, which has over two million followers. Yet, Sharii’s personal ideology is right-wing both in economic and cultural dimensions.

No left-wing party participated in the elections, and indeed the Central Election Commission declined to register the Communist Party. The latter believes this was an unlawful decision, despite Ukraine’s “decommunization” laws, because the Ukrainian courts are yet to pass a final judgment on the party ban. The Venice Commission on Human Rights heavily criticized the decommunization law for unjustifiably restricting the freedom of political association, yet Ukraine’s own Constitutional Court recently confirmed that the law did not violate the constitution.

Despite the dubious legality of these decisions, the Communists were reduced to complaining online. Their public activity has been reduced to nil in recent years, faced with the climate of nationalist violence. The once-large Communist electorate likely split between Servant of the People, the Opposition Platform, and Sharii, or else stayed at home. A few candidates from the embryonic New Left stood in the single-mandate districts, but their lack of answers to any of the pressing questions regarding Ukraine’s development condemned them to miserable results.

The astonishing results for Zelenskiy and his party are indisputable signs of a profound crisis of Ukraine’s political, economic, as well as intellectual, elites. The presidential and political elections of 2019 showed a huge demand for alternative ones. The demand for a deeper change — and an alternative project for national development — can only grow as disappointment with these “new faces” mounts. Indeed, for a poor country torn by many internal and geopolitical contradictions, achieving such change is a question of survival.

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